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## Postcolonial Children's Literature: Songs of Innocence and Experience with Reference to Marina Budhos' *Ask Me no Questions* (2007), and Cathryn Clinton's *A Stone in my Hand* (2002)

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**Keywords:** Children's Literature, trauma, war, conflict, immigration, loss of parents.

**ABSTRACT:** The purpose of this paper is to show how psychological trauma resulted from conflicts such as colonialism, immigration, racism, wars and invasion; and even gender discrimination makes its way into postcolonial children's literature. For example, some contemporary writers of children's literature depict the painful experience of young immigrants who are living under constant stress and tension. Others try to depict how the Middle East conflicts and turmoil affect children living under occupation. In all of these cases, children are highly at risk of psychological trauma. This paper is going to discuss two contemporary children's novels which address the issues of immigration and war conflicts: Marina Budhos' *Ask Me no questions* (2007), and Cathryn Clinton's *A Stone in my Hand* (2002). They were chosen to reflect not only the variety of children's literature available, but also the unique struggles faced by young female protagonists living in two different cultural and political environments. The common thread running through these two novels is the experience of emotional trauma that young protagonists go through. The study of such trauma is at the core of the discussion of both novels. The paper will show how the protagonists of the two novels suffer "a double or triple trauma for children, who may witness the forcible removal of the parent, suddenly lose their caregiver, and/or abruptly lose their familiar home environment" (McLeigh).

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Children's literature used to be an area of imagination where one experienced the world of peace and innocence. It has been often associated with "fantasy and the magically surrealistic universes" ("Realism in Children's Literature" 45). As Isaac Gilman explains,

Stories can call children to imagine the extraordinary, to believe the impossible, to experience the unfamiliar, and to see themselves in the lives of the characters. Stories can show children the possibilities, and the freedom, which childhood offers them.

For many centuries, children's literature has reflected the historical and cultural backgrounds of each age. For example, during the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, English children's literature was mainly didactic and moralistic, while in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it was more concerned with travels, and adventure communicating with new people and cultures. All this was written under the genre of 'folk and fairy tales' (Gopalakrishnan 6). The dominant conception of childhood in this literature is that "children do not 'deserve' to suffer because, in their idealized image, they symbolize purity and innocence" (qtd. in Gilligan 129).

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, however, the conception of childhood changed and children's literature began to appear as an established literary genre and, hence, to be considered as seriously as any other literary genre. Since World War One, "subjects previously thought too upsetting for children [have been] deemed appropriate and even necessary" (Kidd 120). Children in modern times have been caught in the crossfire of many racial, cultural and war clashes. Immigration problems, wars,

terrorism, natural disasters and annihilation have become an inevitable part of children's literature. As Ambika Gopalakrishnan explains,

Children have become more sophisticated and knowledgeable about certain life experiences than children of any previous generation ... the topics of this body of literature are therefore very hard to distinguish from adult literature in many cases. Death, war, starvation, terror, violence - everything is part of children's literature now, as it is, unfortunately, a part of some children's lives. (4)

Moreover, the end of the Cold War has created a "favourable international environment that has facilitated the export of Western models of childhood, victimhood and human psychology around the world" (Gilligan 129). As many children have witnessed several wars, and gone through several immigration troubles, their literature has been a rich area of study for psychology:

In the armed conflicts of recent years, children of all ages have increasingly been victimized as both targets and perpetrators of violence. Two million children are thought to have died in wars between 1990 and 2001, another six million have been wounded or disabled, and one million have been orphaned ... Approximately 20 million children have been forced from their homes because of armed conflict and civil strife. Some seven million of those children have sought refuge in another country. (Goździak 188-189)

The topic of children's traumatization has become the most prominent thread in the body of children's literature. This instigates many critics to investigate historical trauma in children's literature. As Blake puts it, "in recent years, authors and literary critics have expanded the study of trauma to literature, which allows knowledge of trauma and its symptoms to reach a larger audience and gives authors an opportunity to illustrate how the human mind experiences and processes traumatic events."

## 2. THE OBJECTIVE OF THIS PAPER:

The purpose of this paper is to show how psychological trauma resulted from conflicts such as colonialism, immigration, racism, wars and invasion; and even gender discrimination makes its way into postcolonial children's literature. For example, some contemporary writers of children's literature depict the painful experience of young immigrants who are living under constant stress and tension. Others try to depict how the Middle East conflicts and turmoil affect children living under occupation. In all of these cases, children are highly at risk of psychological trauma. This paper is going to discuss two contemporary children's novels which address the issues of immigration and war conflicts: Marina Budhos' *Ask Me no questions* (2007), and Cathryn Clinton's *A Stone in my Hand* (2002). They were chosen to reflect not only the variety of children's literature available, but also the unique struggles faced by young female protagonists living in two different cultural and political environments. The common thread running through these two novels is the experience of emotional trauma that young protagonists go through. The study of such trauma is at the core of the discussion of both novels. The paper will show how the protagonists of the two novels suffer "a double or triple trauma for children, who may witness the forcible removal of the parent, suddenly lose their caregiver, and/or abruptly lose their familiar home environment" (McLeigh).

## 3. IMMIGRATION AND TRAUMA IN MARINA BUDHOS' *ASK ME NO QUESTIONS* (2007):

People who immigrate to the United States from underdeveloped or developing countries have been primarily motivated by the desire to raise their standard of living, and to provide a better chance of education for their children, and a better chance of social, cultural and economic advancement for their families. For ages, such immigration had often positive effects and many immigrants have more or less achieved their aims. However, the sudden 9/11 terrorist attack on the US has had a great negative impact on immigrants and immigration. One of the grave consequences

of that attack has been the dramatic change in the American attitude towards immigrants, and the tremendous change in the US immigration policy. The current U.S. immigration policy mandates the arrest of undocumented parents, creating a traumatic impact on the unfortunate children who have had to undergo such a detrimental experience. Indeed, this “recent intensification of immigration enforcement activities by the federal government has increasingly put these children at risk [not only] of family separation, [but also] of economic hardship, and psychological trauma” (Capps 1). In the US, in particular, many undocumented parents have been increasingly arrested and/or deported by the immigration task forces since that fatal date. As a result, many immigrant children have undergone some inexpressible physical and psychological traumatic events. Besides having no one to care for them and protect them from the dangers and difficulties they are likely to confront as vulnerable children living alone in an unfriendly world, many of these immigrants psychologically suffer from “the fundamental sense of loss, rootlessness and unbelonging that often comes with living in a global space” (Robertson 40).

Marina Budhos’ *Ask Me no Questions* is a good example of how the trauma experienced by immigrant children affects their personalities and the way they view their own world. The novel is narrated by a 14-year-old girl, Nadira, whose Muslim family left Bangladesh, their homeland, and went to America, the land of “dreams-come-true.” When they arrive in America, they carry with them indelible memories of the pain that caused them to leave their motherland. But, unfortunately, their past experiences of trauma do not end with their arrival in the land of their dreams; for the factual experiences of settling and trying to integrate in their chosen homeland have proved to be equally traumatic. They moved to America with their great dreams of making a fortune, joining universities and settling down. The family tries hard to fit in and assimilate into the American society, fervently hoping that one day they can be part of it and can acquire their full American citizenship. Well-aware that returning to Bangladesh is out of the question, and that, any way, life there would not be much better than here, every member of the family does his utmost to assimilate in their new “home.” The father even convinces himself that he “loves this country in his own way; it’s like this bowl he carries in his heart – so full, so ready to trust” (7). He tries his hand at all possible honest work, to raise enough money to support his family and, also, to fit in with his new society. Recording her father’s varied endeavors to attain his final aim, Nadira says:

Abba worked all kinds of jobs. He sold candied nuts from a cart on the streets of Manhattan. He worked on a construction crew until he smashed his kneecap. He swapped down lunch counters, delivered hot pizzas in thick silver nylon bags. Then Abba began working as a waiter in a restaurant. (7)

Aisha, Nadira’s 16-year-old sister, “wanted to be a doctor going to Harvard medical School” (2). She is very keen to look American and to act like an American kid: “She began to study the other kids – especially the American one ... Sometimes she’s stand in front of the mirror practicing phrases like ‘my mom’ or ‘awesome’ ... She studied what they wore, their flare-leg pants, their macramé bracelet, and she begged Ma to take her shopping to buy exactly the same things” (24).

However, all their strenuous efforts create nothing better than the “dream of a home,” (8) but by no means, a real home. With all their efforts, they remain illegal aliens. In many ways, their process of immigration and the hardships they experience while attempting to settle permanently in America have only added to their distress and trauma. The parents and their two daughters, Aisha and Nadira, live under constant stress, incessantly scared of being found out and deported: “words keep drumming: special registration. Deportation. Green card. Residency. Asylum. We live our lives by these words” (1-2). Though they believe they have actually loved America, they cannot forget that they are still “illegal aliens” (151); they cannot fit in with their chosen home. They are overwhelmed by a profound sense of not belonging anywhere: “The thing is, we’ve always lived this way - floating, not sure where to belong” (8). Entrapped in America, they cannot go back to their motherland, for all practical purposes. In fact, they sold out every bit of their belongings in order to afford moving to America to fulfill their long-cherished dream, so that now they have nothing at all left over there to go back for. That is why, they have decided to live on, despite hardships and adversity, as invisible as possible, following the advice of the father, who

continuously reminds them: “‘don’t let them see you.’ But I think it hurt him, to hide so much” (58).

The beginning of their experience is altogether unpromising; yet, worse is to follow. The terrorist attack of 9/11 turns their dream into a nightmare. After that attack, “the recent intensification of immigration enforcement activities by the federal government increasingly adds stressors to families with undocumented members and puts children at risk of family separation, economic hardship and psychological trauma” (*Healing the Damage* 9). This is exactly what happens to Nadira and her family. The aftermath of the September 11 terrorist attack deprives them of their peaceful invisible life as they have now unwillingly emerged as the visible enemy. They lose all hope of ever being welcome in what they had once wished to become their new country, their future, and their “home.” Their identity is badly shaken. They begin to feel as if the air were frozen around them. They recognize that they are now generally considered the unwelcomed “other:” “We watched the news of the war and saw ourselves as others saw us: dark, flitting shadows, grenades blooming in our fists. Dangerous” (9). Living in America as illegal immigrants has been traumatic enough for the family, especially, for the two daughters. As Potochnick asserts, “children of unauthorized immigrants ... are more likely to report anxiety, fear, sadness, posttraumatic stress symptoms, anger, and withdrawal” (470).

Nadira’s family, further, suffers a new severe trauma when the father, in the aftermath of the 9/11 attack, decides that they can no longer keep on living as illegal immigrants; they have to “cross the borders and start again” in Canada where they can apply for asylum and acquire legal citizenship. “Why should we wait for them to kick us out? ... I want to live in a place where I can hold my head up” (10). They need to belong somewhere. But the consequences of his final resolute decision turn out to be neither propitious for himself nor for his family; the nearer they get to the borders, the more they all experience the painful feeling that they are losing a home; a long harbored dream. Pathetically expressing this aching feeling shared by the whole family, Nadira says:

We pass a sign: LEAVING THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA. I see Abba’s hand pause as he grabs his chest, rubbing. It hurts this leaving. We weren’t supposed to do this. We were supposed to stay and then one day roll the word in our mouth: *home*. Every inch the car moves forward the word seems to crash under our tires. (12)

These afflictive emotions are badly aggravated by a new adversity. Before they cross the border, the father is stopped and taken into detention. The consequence of this new adversity is catastrophic to the whole family, especially to the two daughters. It is at this point that the family irretrievably falls apart. The mother stays near her husband. Ordered by her father to go back with her sister alone to Flushing High where they used to live with their parents before, Nadira feels deeply lonesome and perplexed; her father’s final decision has ultimately disintegrated their once unified family: “I feel as if Abba has sliced the air into two, leaving a ragged gap between them and us. Go back without them? And live where? And how?” Questions without answers crowd together into the child’s mind. The father’s arrest virtually leads to a lifetime of traumatic psychological and physical impacts on the lives of both daughters: “I don’t know what to do with myself anymore. I can’t figure out how to get us through this”(95). Thus, the two vulnerable children are forced to confront all the inevitable hardships and challenges on their own.

As in a traditional Bildungsroman, this traumatic separation from their parents robs both Nadira and Aisha from their innocent childhood. At the very beginning of the story, the reader is introduced to Nadira as an innocent child, who puts her head against her parents’ legs and enjoys listening to their stories about old days; their home in Bangladesh; their family; how her parents met each other; and stories about her grandparents and their culture. During these days of innocence and childhood, Nadira’s main problem, like many of her age, is her jealousy of her elder sister, who seems to be smarter, more active, slimmer, and even quicker to be Americanized than herself:

Aisha and I, we never hit it off, really. She's the quick one, the one with a flashing temper whom Abba treats like a firstborn son, while I'm the slow-wit second-born who just follows along ... It's hard to have a sister who is perfect. (3)

However, by going back alone to Flushing High, Nadira's and Aisha's childhood days come to an end. Their sense of safety and trust is absolutely shattered. They suddenly feel disconnected, disconcerted and forlorn. They start to have bad dreams, and they find it difficult to stop thinking about what happened. Especially when their father has been falsely accused of paying money to terrorist organizations, the two sisters remain for long in a state of psychological shock. Their memory of what happened and their feelings about it are disconnected. But this is a natural result of a child's sudden separation from her parent. As Makariev and Shaver argue,

The physical separation between a parent and child, particularly when unexpected as in the case of deportation, disrupts this essential secure base, risking internalizing symptoms (depression, anxiety), externalizing behaviors (withdrawal, aggression), and social and cognitive difficulties. (116)

After Nadira's father is imprisoned, her psychological trauma is increasingly heightened as she is compelled to go through the tough experiences undergone by many young immigrants separated from their parents by similar circumstances and living all by themselves in the US. As a result of being separated from her father, Nadira is overwhelmed with a feeling of helplessness, shame, a sense of guilt and a sense of being different from others. The thing that obsesses her mind most about the situation, in which she has been forcibly placed, is their pathetic helplessness and vulnerability: "in the mirror all I see is a fat girl with chubby hands. I look stupid, not like someone who's good at math or anything else. And definitely not like a daughter who can help her parents" (49). She becomes isolated, nervous and hopeless. She feels betrayed and terrified because the world is no longer a safe place for her; she is even afraid to go to school. When she and Aisha go, they "gingerly make (their) way to it." Nadira hears her heart thudding all the time as if it were "a boat knocking against wood" (80). Whenever she sees an officer, she is seized with a sense of panic; she feels that "he is combing" her with his eyes and that he is going to "pull (her) away from everything (she knows)" (68). Even her sense of belonging to all the places that she used to visit with her mother, the sense that is usually developed in the heart of an innocent and hopeful child, has now been totally crushed. The places that she used to love have become different and strange. As she rides the 7 Train, a journey that she has cherished before, everything looks strange and unfriendly: "everything looks different to us now: the streets, the tar roofs, and the park. I inch a little closer to Aisha. None of this is ours anymore" (67).

In this connection, describing the feelings of children after one of their parents is arrested, Randy Capps rightly states: "During the time these parents were held, their children and other family members experienced significant hardship, including difficulty coping with the economic and psychological stress caused by the arrest and the uncertainty of not knowing when or if the arrested parent would be released" (3). This statement aptly describes the state of Aisha, the elder sister, as well, not only Nadira's. Aisha, who has proved before, more able than the rest of her family in fitting in with their new society, making wholesome social relationships, talking freely and hopefully with her American friends about scholarships, universities and graduation, shows an altogether different attitude after the imprisonment of their father. As Nadira notices: "she is not the same as they are; she's falling away into a corner" (91).

Typical of those who suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder, Aisha and her sister are continually suffering from sleeplessness as Nadira explains: "I and Aisha sleep hunched against one another. I can sense her fright, her cold heels bumping against mine. 'Go to sleep' I tell her over and over, but I know she can't" (94). Aisha suffers from acute insomnia and if she sleeps, scaring nightmares haunt her nights "every time I go up on the stage, these policemen come and tell me 'you don't belong here.' Then they take me and lock me up in a cell with no light" (102). Now Aisha lives the metaphorical and actual nightmare of unbelonging; it is a nightmare that obsesses her life while awake, and comes to her every night whenever she tries to sleep. She feels desperately afraid of what is to come. As she finally admits to Nadira: "I'm scared," she whispers.

‘I’m scared for Abba’” (66). Thus, even Aisha, who used to be a self-confident, independent, and powerful Americanized girl, suffers the same traumatic experience as her younger sister does. Commenting on the change she notices in her sister’s attitude, Nadira says: “this time she’s up against something that’s so bigger than her, beyond her power” (93).

This traumatic experience leaves Aisha and Nadira feeling frightened, sad, anxious, and disconnected. However, a little later, this traumatic separation from their parents is overwhelmingly increased by the arrest of their uncle, Ahmad, as well. Arresting their uncle is a “reminder of the original traumatic event” (7) as Bruce Perry explains. When their uncle is arrested for illegal residence, Nadira and her sister remember the arrest of their own father, and the same traumatic symptoms of fear and stress emerge again on the surface of their minds. One can see how Nadira is scared when the immigration officers come to her uncle’s home to investigate his case; Nadira is scared that they would take her uncle and her auntie away just like what has happened with her father and mother: “I chew on my thumbnail. I do not like this woman touching Auntie” (82). This situation stirs all the fears and worries of the two unhappy sisters; it fills their nights with more nightmares and distress:

That night Aisha yells out in her sleep. She thrashes beside me, her hair springing up in wild coils. Her eyes look strange and unmoored. "Aisha is even scared from success; from her own dreams. She is afraid that she would do everything and then everything is taken from her again: "what if I put myself forward, and then they take everything away?" (113).

This fear from everyone and everything, not only from being seen, but, strangely enough, from achieving success of any kind, leaves Aisha and Nadira frustrated and utterly depressed. Aisha does not go to her long-awaited-for interview in Barnard University. She suffers from a kind of disillusionment and frustration: "I realized I can't do this anymore. It's too hard. Too big. Nothing's working. Not the letters. Nothing. Maybe if I just stop wanting so much, they can't hurt me. I don't want to stand out anymore, Nadira. It hurts too much" (113).

However, as a Bildungsroman, *Ask Me No Questions* portrays the post-traumatic change that happens to a young teenager, suddenly depriving her of her innocent childhood and turning her into an experienced adult. Indeed, the traumatic events of being separated from their parents, taking their father into detention, accusing him of being a terrorist, and living under constant threat of deportation, turn both Nadira and Aisha into experienced adults. Returning to Flushing High alone without their parents, they are both well aware that now they have to act like grownups; they have to be up to the huge responsibility they will have to shoulder; they have to "dig their feet in and ... fight" on their own (45). Childhood, for the two sisters, has come to an abrupt end and a new stage starts. Now that the circumstances have altogether changed their way of life, they are compelled to leave their childhood behind and to be involved into the adults’ world in the hope of being able to, somehow, help their father.

In order to move on, it has been important for Nadira to supersede her old memories and previous emotions. There is no room for childhood jealousy or even for childhood dreams, anymore. Nadira’s attitude towards her sister changes; she is not the jealous young sister anymore. Now she feels herself an adult who has serious responsibilities towards her family; even sympathetically desiring to see the old dream of her sister achieved:

It's weird. Now it's me who feels older than Aisha and is worried about her. Now that I've helped Lily, it's as if I want to protect everyone: Auntie from uncle and the bad news about his possible deportation, Uncle from himself, and Aisha from taking everything so hard (101).

Yet, if “trauma involves intense personal suffering, it also involves the recognition of realities that most of us have not begun to face” (Caruth vii). This is typically true of both Nadira and her sister, Aisha. Now being entangled in the grownup world, discovering its secrets and miseries, they both start to look at people in a different way. For example, they begin to understand and philosophize about the causes behind Uncle Ahmad’s constant nervousness and short-temper. Though before that, he has just seemed to them to be a violent and unbearable person, Nadira now

attempts to probe deep into the inward motives that have led him to be what he is; which, indeed, marks her first step towards growing up: "He's been hearing lots of bad stories, and it's filling him up like a sharp pickle. Uncle stews in all those nasty words, and he can't help himself- his feelings ooze out of him until he's short tempered and pick a fight over the smallest of things" (45).

Furthermore, it seems that interacting with the grownups' world has made Nadira mature enough to make right judgments about those around her. For instance, it is she, who discovers the reality about Lily's father, whom Lily considers a perfect man. Nadira finds out that the real reason behind all the problems between him and Lily's mother is that he betrays his wife with the manicurist who works in his shop. Yet, this is too much for Nadira to take in. Knowing too much about the adult world helps Nadira to mature too early, but it also perplexes her: "I don't like the way the adults have been talking to me since this all began. Either they speak like I'm a little baby who can't understand the stupidest thing, or they gaze at me with the weight and sadness of the world behind their eyes, making me feel so confused" (36).

Nadira's response to the temptation presented by Tareq provides another example of her having actually grown up. Tareq's dishonest way to manipulate people and take money for fake IDs, at a certain moment, seems to be the only way for Nadira to save her father. However, Nadira, eventually, proves to be mature enough "to choose right, even when the storms come" (122).

As for Aisha, the elder sister, the trauma has, similarly, left some positive impact. Aisha has changed from a self-centered teenager to a responsible young lady who is ready to sacrifice her dream for the sake of her family. Aisha is able to arrange her priorities. Her childhood dreams come to their end; they do not matter anymore: "none of that matters anymore. Not if Abba is in detention. They've hauled him off as if he's a terrorist. We have to clear up all this whole business. So Ma doesn't have to live in shelter, and I can go to college, and we can just *get on with our life*" (63).

Finding themselves involuntarily embroiled in the complex world of grownups, the two children undertake the responsibility of trying to save their family, though they are well aware it is not an easy job. Their case falls beautifully in line with Srour's psychological analysis of such cases:

The child who has been directly exposed to a traumatic event has had the opportunity to test his ability and gain strength on his own. In this case he may have been able to face the danger and surpass it peacefully by internalizing it so he is less afraid/anxious. (89)

This is exactly true of Nadira and Aisha as they manage to test their abilities and gain strength to challenge the traumatic situation they have been placed in. By the end of the novel, Nadira acts like a grown-up girl and is, subsequently, treated like a grownup. It is Nadira, the once-lazy fat girl, who is now taking care of her family. "It's weird having my mother cry in my arms when it should be the other way around. I feel her tremble against me as if she weighs nothing and is made of air"(127). When her father's lawyer gives up, Nadira is able to stand alone in the court defending her father, the right of her family to live, and to achieve their honest dreams. She proves to the court that the authorities have got the wrong person; as her father spells his name "Hossain" with an *a*, while the other one they look for is Hossein with an *e*. She is the one who is able to prove that the money her father used to give to the Islamic Center is not for donation for a terrorist organization but it is how he has saved his money for his children's tuition (134-136). Nadira is able to impress the judge who nearly rebukes the agents in the court room: "This ninth grader can straighten it out in five minutes! Does anyone here do their homework?" (135). As for Aisha, her valedictorian speech is a defense not only of her family, but of all stereotyped people:

All I ask you is to see me for who I am. Aisha. I spell my name not with a *y* or an *e*, but with an *i*. See me. I live with you. I live near you. I go to your school; I eat in your cafeteria; I take the same classes. Now I am your valedictorian. I want what you want. I want a future. (153)



#### 4. WAR AND TRAUMA IN CATHRYN CLINTON'S *A STONE IN MY HAND* (2010):

Similar to Marina Budhos' *Ask Me No Questions*, Kathryn Clinton's *A Stone in my Hand* experiments with placing children into real world settings, making them face "scenarios that mirror the [world's] current political and social problems" (Hughes 547-8). It tells the story of an 11-year-old girl, Malaak, who lives in Gaza, a Palestinian city under curfew. Like the illegal immigrants in the US, most people in Gaza are uprooted from their usurped motherland, their old memories, and their history; they feel quite isolated and without a real home.

The sense of childhood as a period of fantasy, carefree play, merriment and minimal responsibilities, hardly exists for Palestinian children. For over sixty years, children have been living under the tyrannical occupation and have been suffering constant violence. They have been deprived too early of their innocent childhood and forced to live through the dangers and experience the hardships suffered by adults. They witness death, torture, brutal crimes and dangers of every kind encompassing their lives and the lives of their families and friends every day, and, hence, they are all the time desperately seeking to find ways of refuge; ways to protect themselves and their beloved ones from the violence that surrounds them. As Usher notes about the first Intifada,

Palestinian children have not only had to stand and watch their homes being destroyed; they have witnessed their mothers and sisters being insulted, their brothers being beaten, and their fathers - especially their fathers - being degraded and, on some occasions, killed. (26)

More than any other children in the world, Palestinian ones are exposed to complex traumatic events that necessarily have negative effects on the development of their personalities. As

Sarat clarifies, "The circumstances following the near-complete depopulation of the part of Palestine that became Israel, and the creation of the refugee condition, made very possible the transformation of the events of 1948 into a collective trauma" (72).

Hence, Palestinian children grow up differently from most other children in the world; the violence they are all the time involved in destroys their innocence and exposes them to indescribable physical and psychological trauma, which is too difficult to heal. Their plight has been awfully neglected by many western writers for many years. However, for the past few years, there has been a great shift in perception of the Palestinian issue and of the suffering of many Palestinian children living under the Israeli occupation. A good example of this positive shift in children's literature is Cathryn Clinton's *A Stone in My Hand* (2010). It reflects the tragic reality that Palestinian children live.

The story starts with Malaak, "the bird girl," waiting for her father who has gone to look for work in Israel but has never come back. Nobody knows exactly what has happened to him. His wife guesses that he is dead, but she is too busy with her new heavy responsibilities to have the time to find out what has really happened to her husband. Taking care of her family and raising her children under very hard circumstances is more than enough for her; especially that the city is under curfew and the schools are closed. As Malaak explains: "I have not been to school since my father left. The authorities closed all the schools the day after that and kept them closed for long time" (34). Both the mother and her sixteen-year-old daughter, Hend, whose secondary school is closed as well, have to work to support the family while the father is absent. They clean houses for the rich people of Gaza. However, the toiling mother has never forsaken her great dream to offer her children a good education in order to give them the chance to live a better life than that of their unhappy parents. Thus, she keeps on reminding them: "you must be able to read well ... You will go to the university" (34). Heavy as her burden is, she has another more weighty responsibility; she has to keep watch over her 12-year rebellious son, Hamid, for not involving himself in the violence that has lately spread throughout the city. Though Malaak's mother appears to be a brave and strong woman, her heart is broken and sadness has never left her since her husband disappeared: "her eyes are full. Full of salty water like the sea. The Dead Sea"(5). When night comes, she finds herself alone; remembers her husband and she spends the night crying. That is why her eldest daughter, Hend, sleeps with her" (28).

Malaak's family is not the only family suffering in Gaza. Most families in Gaza are refugees who left their houses in 1948 and went to live in Gaza; they were brutally forced to leave their homes by the Israeli occupying forces. Unlike the original inhabitants of Gaza, the expatriate families have been transported from their original home cities and brought to live in refugee camps in Gaza. As Malaak's mother recounts:

The Jewish soldiers drove thousands of Palestinians from their homes in Lydda (Jerusalem) in 1948. The British had evacuated Palestinians before, but then the British let people go back, so my grandparents thought the same thing would happen again. They just locked their house and left. My mother still has the key ... When I was little, I would close my eyes and pretend that I was in that beautiful place in Jerusalem and nothing had changed since that picture. (55-56)

The events of the story take place during the first Palestinian Intifada, when People in Gaza have become incredibly familiar with violence, death, shooting, killing, bombing, or, at the very least being brutally beaten and humiliated by the Israeli soldiers. Each family in the story has lost at least one of its members in the violence. Nasser, a teenager neighbor of Malaak, is killed on his way home from school by an Israeli soldier: "someone must have thrown a stone. When he came out of the store, the Israeli patrol grabbed him and beat him with truncheons. A woman saw the whole thing and knew he had done nothing" (54). On Nasser's funeral, his brother Mahmoud who carries the coffin gets a shot and falls dead, as well. Yet, too much sadness and sorrow often dispel fear; people of Gaza no longer care about their lives, as Nasser's father says after the death of his son; he is no longer afraid "I have given my all ... There is nothing more anyone can take" (6).

The family of Tariq who looks like "a wounded stray dog" (48), is another bereaved family. Tariq has watched his father shot by an Israeli soldier and could not do anything to help his father:

I was with my father when he died?....There were blood everywhere. He was shot several times. I could see the bone in his shoulder. There were pieces of his muscle showing. I tried to put all the pieces back in, but it didn't help.... No one can put all the pieces back together. (76)

Since the death of his father, "part of Tariq was lost. He looks for it. He looks in Hamid and in many other places. Everywhere and anywhere" (49).

The family of Malaak's classmate, Rula, has lost its caregiver, the father who has been imprisoned for political reasons (36). Rula's mother is sick and cannot take care of her family; so they have to live with Rula's aunt. Sadness and silence are the prevailing emotion in this family; as Malaak notes, Rula does not talk much and carries sadness in her eyes: "Rula has no words for me, but I see oldness in her eyes too" (44).

The setting of the novel, Gaza under occupation, strongly shapes the reality many Palestinian children are facing: "having a normal childhood in Palestine is unlikely in the current circumstances and the psychological well-being future of Palestinian children is at risk of being compromised by on-going traumatic experiences" (Altawil, Harrold, and Samara 8). In a place like Gaza, children just like the grass and the trees, look old "wispy and withered before it should be. Old, not young" (44). The novel's setting indicates how Palestinian children are too well acquainted with scenes of violence. They live in constant terror; they might get killed at any time, just for carrying the Palestinian flag; as Malaak timidly points out: "I gasp when I see a young man with his face covered by a *keffiyeh* walk in front of the coffin, holding a Palestinian flag" (58).

Living in this "multi-traumatic environment, where "people have been arrested for even having red, black, green, or white at a funeral" (58), young Palestinian children go through psychological stresses that affect their personalities and their daily lives. As Malaak describes it: "I think we are all using our energy to keep our fears down inside" (59). They experience terror and a feeling of vulnerability and helplessness because of the monstrous violence that takes place around them all the time. They simply witness how "innocent people die in buses, at shops, and during funeral. Innocent people die in wars. The Israelis took our land in a war. They killed women and children too" (69).

Like Budhos' *Ask Me No Questions, A Stone in My Hand* addresses the trauma in children's life, and throughout the novel, it portrays the psychological changes that happen to the children who are traumatized by events in the story. Malaak's 12-year-old brother, Hamid, is a victim of such a traumatic life. He witnesses too much violence and killing in his city to have any hope for a better future. His friend, Nasser, has got killed just for passing the street on a wrong time. Hamid has also seen Nasser's brother being shot by the Israeli soldiers while carrying Nasser's coffin. Hamid recognizes that he does not have a choice; he and the other children have to "fight" as he argues with his sister, Malaak: "we are in a war whether you want to be or not ... what is safe? I don't think anyone is safe. Not anymore" (73).

Though it is said that his father was killed by Islamic Jihadist bombing, he still lays the blame on the Israelis that his father has had to go out to Jerusalem to find a job to support his family because of the curfew imposed upon Gaza. Hamid is rebellious and unhappy; he refuses everything around him and feels that he has to do something to vent his anger. For him, there is no future under this kind of occupation that humiliates people and deprives them of their basic human rights:

I do not want to spend my life standing in lines..., lines for water, lines to get buses to cross the borders, lines to go through checkpoints just because you are a Palestinian. Laughing lines, where the soldiers make fun of you. Lines to be searched – stripped naked and searched for bombs. (46)

Losing his father, being humiliated everywhere, feeling unsafe, losing any hope for a better and more peaceful future, all this makes Hamid angry and rebellious. For him, fighting is the only way to a better future: "And if we don't win this war, what future do I have, Malaak?" (70) He cannot believe what his parents have told him about peace and patience. After all, patience has not saved his father, Nasser, or Mahmoud though they were not fighting.

As for Malaak, the protagonist and the narrator, she seems to be a normal child with a great sense of innocence at the very beginning. In spite of all the violence, she has been able to escape this harsh reality into her world of imagination with her bird, "Abdo," with whom she wants to fly away; maybe to a safe place: "I soar out of the Gaza Strip. Nothing stops me, not the concrete and razor wire, not the guns, not the soldiers ... I may fly away for good, but now I watch and wait" (1-2).

In spite of her trials to "fly away" from this collective trauma, losing her own father who is the only protection for her among all this violence is a shock to Malaak. The memories of her father have never left her especially when she feels scared. She remembers walking with her father when the Israeli soldiers have started to chase some Palestinian young men; her father's arms have been the safe hiding place for Malaak:

My father's leg pressed me back against the wall. It scratched my back. 'Close your eyes.' My father's voice was hard. I closed my eyes, but I heard the crack of a gun. The Jeep started and my father lifted me up. He carried me like a tiny baby. I was deep in his arm. Rocking in his steps. Safe. (24)

Losing her only protection in such a violent environment is not easy for Malaak; it is a crushing incident. Her whole world has changed, and she has never been able to heal the wound in her heart. Malaak seems to have Childhood Traumatic Grief. According to Goodman, Miller, and Judith, "after a death that is shocking, sudden, or terrifying... some children can develop CTG. Children may also develop CTG [when they feel] confused about why or how the person died" (15). Malaak's sudden loss of her father leaves her stuck on the traumatic grief, making it hard for her to do things with her family: "the next morning, when I roll over, there is such tiredness in my brain. My eyes feel swollen. I shake my head to get rid of the tiredness. Then I remember that my father is dead" (43).

Like Nadira in *Ask Me No Questions*, Malaak experiences a number of posttraumatic stress disorder symptoms. The trauma of losing her own father turned Malaak from the free innocent young girl into an escapist introvert who does not want to communicate but with her bird. Malaak, the "Bird Girl," lives in her world of nature and imagination. She lives "in Abdo's eyes" (5). Abdo, her special bird which came to her the night her father left, is her refugee from the cruelty of real

life. Whenever she needs someone to understand her, she moves into her imaginary innocent world of birds and skies. She has become dissociated from everything but her bird; she is not able to speak at all:

After that first day when I lost my words, I didn't try to speak much. If I did, only bits and pieces of words, sometimes just letters or sounds, came out. Now I feel, see, hear the words in my mind, but it is like the front page of a newspaper that someone has torn into little bits. No one can read me. There are too many ragged pieces that don't go together. (13)

Fear knows its way into Malaak's world. The streets of Gaza are not the safe place for her without her father as she expresses herself: "I am afraid to go out on the main streets because of the soldiers. ... Since the Intifada, there are many more units here, and they shoot their guns and beat people" (27). Yet, "Father is not here to pick me up and carry me home." She experiences tension: "my neck is stiff. I rub at the bones in it. Is this tension? Tension seems like a good name for the thing that came into my room and woke me up last night, turning my head from side to side. I could feel its hands on my neck" (31). These senses of fear, tension, threat and danger does not leave Malaak even when she is home. She lives with it and she even looks for it in other children's eyes. When Tariq, a friend of Hamid, her 12-year-old brother, is leaving, she watches for him. He is threatened to be arrested just for crossing the street to go home: "Look into the darkness, Abdo. Look ahead of him, of me. Can you warn us of danger? Can you see it?" (51)

Like so many trauma survivors, Malaak relives her traumatic experiences repeatedly, and she narrates her story from diverse angles time and again. Whether Malaak was told "what happened, saw what happened, or only imagines what happened, scary and disturbing thoughts and images of how a person looked or died may keep coming up in the child's mind" (Goodman, Miller, and Cohen 16). For example, she cannot stop thinking about losing her father: "by the third day. The day of the funeral, I am numb, for I've already played out Father's funeral in my mind so many times" (58). Moreover, Malaak experiences nightmares about her father's death, "Malaak had so many awful dreams about her father's death that she was afraid to go to sleep" (5). Like Nadira in *Ask Me No Questions*, Malaak used to have terrible dreams after losing her father:

One night I had a special dream. It was about my father. He went to the moon by jumping from star to star. When he was almost there, he turned and gave me the signal. I signaled back, and then I ran the other way, circling the moon until I caught him and hugged him. (12)

Malaak tries to escape into the memories of her father, but this does not help much as, just like Nadira, she finds herself forced to join the grownup's world of turmoil. Instead of restoring her father, she is threatened to lose her own brother. Hamid's anger drives him to join the other young men in their barricade to prevent the Israeli soldiers from getting into their district. Afraid that his mother would panic, Hamid tells Malaak and makes her promise not to tell their mother. "If anything should happen to me, give my soccer ball to Tariq. And my notebook of poems is yours, but you are the only one who is allowed to read them. I know I can trust you" (17). Hamid and his friend, Tariq, plan to throw stones at the soldiers; at this point, Malaak feels it is her responsibility to save her own brother from being killed. However, she feels tiny, little, weak, helpless and frustrated. She can do nothing to help:

I hear the crack of the gun, and Hamid is falling on me. We fall to the roof. I bang my head and groan. Hamid is heavy on my legs. "Hamid," I say, but he doesn't answer. "Hamid," I say again. No, it can't be, I think. I feel like I'm floating above us, watching, and then I hear *Do something* in my brain, and I sit up. Hamid's face is toward me, but his eyes are closed. (95)

At this moment Malaak is exposed to another trauma of almost losing her brother and her own life; she recognizes that Hamid is right; "no one is safe." As Hamid has got shot, hospitalized and gone into a comma, she recognizes that in order to help her brother, as Tariq tells her, she has to get out of her silence and her disassociation: "Malaak, you were so brave ... Do not go into that

quiet place. Please. Hamid needs you now”(102). At this point, the traumatized 11-year old girl, accepts her father’s death and starts to think of saving her brother:

Father came to me last night. He knows that Hamid needs me. Father wants me to stay with Hamid. “Oh, Father,” I say, “you must believe that I can help Hamid ... *Hamid will need me more than ever*, I think. I close my eyes and picture Father’s flag. I will take the flag to Hamid today. (106)

The death of Malaak’s father tests her strengths. It does not lead her to absolute destruction. She is able to overcome her own fears by carrying the Palestinian flag to Hamid in spite of the huge number of Israeli soldiers surrounding the hospital. She attempts to heal from the feeling of loss by stressing her responsibility of taking care of what her father used to love, which inspires in her a new appreciation for her life:

I whisper to Hamid again, “Father told me in a dream to bring it to you. He didn’t leave me, and I won’t leave you. I will be back to see you as much as I can, and I will bring the flag each time I come. I can’t leave it here with you because someone might find it, and there are soldiers at this hospital.” I lift Hamid’s arm and slip the flag out and put it under my sweater. (108-109)

Like Nadira, Malaak is able to cure herself and overcome her trauma. At the end of the novel, the previously escapist, scared silent girl, turns to be a mature experienced one who is able to beat the violence around her without getting trapped in it. She is even stronger than ever:

My eyes are closed, and I’m singing inside. I did it. I did it. I outran the darkness. I took the flag to Hamid. I hug the flag tight to me. I touch both Hamid and Father when I hold the flag ... I decided that I will come up here each morning to send my thoughts to Hamid. I will think, *you are a fighter. You will live. You are a fighter. You will live*. I feel the strength in these words. They will keep him going until I can see him each day. (109)

## 5. CONCLUSION:

As Kenneth Kidd rightly says, “thanks in part to the dissemination of psychoanalysis and the professionalization of mental health work, trauma is a key concept in our life and literature” (122). As a matter of fact, the recent children’s literature reflects the psychological traumas of many children of different cultural backgrounds who are suffering due to either immigration procedures, as in Marina Budhos’ *Ask Me no questions*; or to being exposed to violence and oppression as in Cathryn Clinton’s *A Stone in my Hand*. In both novels, children are exposed to social and political problems that are aggravated by losing their caregiver. The loss of the father is the main traumatic event that shatters the child’s world, destroys what was once familiar and upsets their ordinary sense of protection and strength. In both novels, traumatized children show signs of stress, fear, and disassociation. However, narrated from the traumatized child point of view, the two narratives seem to be a way of healing. By the end of the novels, both female protagonists are able to overcome their traumas and pass from the world of innocence into the world of experience.

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